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Creolization of the Atlantic World. The Portuguese and the Kongolese

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I

Gilberto Freyre is back in fashion due to the new interest in hybrid architecture, gastronomy, clothing and life styles. International migration and inter-ethnic marriages exploded; racist prejudice and discriminatory action, although still visible in different continents, tend to decline. Gilberto Freyre played a major role in Brazil in the 1930s: he challenged the dominant idea of white supremacy, recognised the social and cultural importance of African people and re-evaluated the qualities of hybridism, then labelled as *mestiçagem*.¹ He was preceded by the Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos, who published a book on the 'Cosmic Race' in 1929. Iberian American people were then praised as mixed race people, concentrating all the qualities of the human race and preparing its future.² Gilberto Freyre had much more impact on his own country than Vasconcelos on Mexico: Freyre re-founded Brazilian national mythology, not a minor achievement which outlasted the twentieth century.³

¹ Gilberto Freyre, *Casa Grande e Senzala: formação da família brasileira sob o regime de economia patriarcal* (Rio de Janeiro: Maya & Schmidt, 1933); English translation by Samuel Putnam, *The Masters and the Slaves. A Study in the Development of the Brazilian Civilization* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946).

² José Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica. Misión de la raza iberoamericana. Notes de viajes a la América del Sur* (Barcelona, 1929); translated into English and annotated by Didier T. Jaén in a bilingual edition: *The Cosmic Race* (Los Angeles: California State University, 1979).

³ For the original context see Roberto DaMatta, *Carnavais, malandros e heróis: para uma sociologia do dilema brasileiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1979); *idem* 'Apresentação', Gilberto Freyre, *Sobrados e mucambos. Decadência do patriarcado rural e desenvolvimento do urbano*, 1st ed. 1936 (São Paulo: BGlobal, 2003), pp. 11-26; Maria Lúcia Garcia Pallares-Burke, *Gilberto Freyre. Um vitoriano dos trópicos* (São Paulo: UNESP, 2006).

Gilberto Freyre's progressive reasoning started to fade away in 1950, when he accepted an invitation from the Salazar regime to visit the Portuguese colonies. His original praise of the Portuguese ability to adapt to the tropics and to create populations of mixed race people in Brazil was then projected onto the contemporary colonial systems in Africa and Asia, coining the notion of *Lusotropicalism*.⁴ He did not deny racism in the past and present, but posited that the Portuguese had been much milder than the British and the Dutch in their colonial enterprise. Salazar's regime, which had been very suspicious of Freyre's promotion of mixed race people in the 1930s, saw the possibility of recycling his theories in the 1950s to resist decolonisation and stress the supposed exceptionality of the Portuguese case. The argument was that all native populations belonged to the Portuguese community, built through centuries of 'productive interaction'. The problem was that the vast majority of native populations were not recognised as citizens: they were still labelled in 1959 as 'non-civilised' (99% in Guinea, 97% in Mozambique, 95% in Angola), before this typical colonial classification vanished from the Annual Statistics.⁵ But Freyre was not an innocent manipulated intellectual: while in the 1930s and 1940s he had maintained strong relations with the Portuguese republican opposition to Salazar, expressed in the preface by António Sérgio to his book *O mundo que o português criou*,⁶ Freyre engaged in active praise of Salazar and Salazar's dictatorship in the

⁴ Gilberto Freyre, 'Em torno de um novo conceito de tropicalismo' *Brasília*, 7 (1952); *idem*, *Aventura e rotina: sugestões de uma viagem à procura das constantes portuguesas do carácter e acção* (Lisbon: Livros da Brasil, 1952); *idem*, *Um brasileiro em terras portuguesas: introdução a uma possível lusotropicalologia* (Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1953); *idem*, *Integração portuguesa nos trópicos* (Lisbon: Junta de Investigações do Ultramar, 1958); *idem*, *O luso e o trópico. Sugestões em torno de métodos portugueses de integração dos povos autóctones e de culturas diferentes da europeia num complexo novo civilizacional: o lusotropical* (Lisbon: Comissão para as Comemorações do V Centenário da Morte do Infante D. Henrique, 1961) translated into English and French.

⁵ *Anuário Estatístico do Ultramar* (Lisbon: Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 1959).

⁶ Gilberto Freyre, *O mundo que o português criou*, preface by António Sérgio (Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1940)

1950s and beginning of the 1960s.⁷ His vision of ‘mild’ race relations in Brazil and in the Portuguese colonies was challenged by Marvin Harris in the 1950s. Harris demonstrated that there were almost no mixed race people in Mozambique, where an informal system of segregation close to the South African apartheid had been developed.⁸ We know that there were then less than 1% of mixed race people in Angola, Mozambique and Portuguese colonies in India.⁹ The last blow to Gilberto Freyre’s *lusotropicalism* came from Charles Boxer’s book *Race Relation in the Portuguese Empire*. Boxer made a systematic inventory of all forms of discrimination and segregation practiced in each Portuguese colony until the beginning of the nineteenth century.¹⁰

The notion of *lusotropicalism* thus is a clear example of “fausse pensée”: it was taken out of the original context and applied for political reasons to a wide Portuguese colonial world that had little to do with the Brazilian experience. Even if we accept the validity of Freyre’s approach concerning Brazil, there is a supplementary problem: he rooted the idea of hybridism (or *mestiçagem*) on the Portuguese ability to adapt to different regions of the world and assimilate other peoples. African people certainly played a decisive role in Freyre’s vision, mainly as workers and as domestic slaves, introducing vivacity, joy and softness into the Portuguese melancholic and rigid outlook, according to his own words, but they were

⁷ Besides the texts already quoted, see the analysis by Yves Léonard, ‘Salazarisme et lusotropicalisme, histoire d’une appropriation’, *Lusotopie* 1997), pp. 211-6; *idem*, ‘O ultramar português’, in Francisco Bethencourt and Kirti Chaudhuri (eds.), *História da Expansão Portuguesa*, vol. 5 (Lisbon: Círculo de Leitores, 1999), pp. 31-50; Cláudia Castelo, *O modo português de estar no mundo: o lusotropicalismo e a ideologia colonial portuguesa* (Porto: Afrontamento, 1998).

⁸ Marvin Harris, *Town and Country in Brazil* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956); *idem*, ‘Portugal’s African ‘Wards’: a First-Hand Report on Labour and Education in Mozambique’ *Africa Today*, V (1958). See the analysis of these conflict in Lorenzo Macagno, ‘Um antropólogo Americano no “mundo que o português criou”’. *Relações raciais no Brasil e em Moçambique Segundo Marvin Harris*, *Lusotopie* (1999), pp. 143-61.

⁹ *Anuário estatístico do Ultramar* (Lisbon: INE, 1959).

¹⁰ Charles R. Boxer, *Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire, 1415-1825* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).

placed in a subordinated position. Native Americans were almost left out of Freyre's picture, integrated as sexual objects, excluded as incapable of hard work. Hybridism was then placed within a schematic historical approach that often shows more stereotype than real analysis, more anecdotal cases than study of configurations, without striking a balance between the different elements involved or without clearly defining the new elements resulting from cultural exchange, which is the core of true hybridism.¹¹ It was back in Iberia that Freyre found the seeds of Portuguese openness in the tropical environment. Portugal and the Portuguese resulted from a long historical process, but for Freyre the Portuguese benefited from a constant mixture with Muslims, namely from North Africa, which introduced the habit of interethnic contact and attraction to people with dark skin. Strikingly, the extraordinary rise of ethnic prejudices in Iberia, with the classification of *mozárabes*, *moriscos*, *marranos* or *New Christians*, carrying with it active forms of discrimination and segregation, were not taken into consideration. I do not deny the importance of previous historical experiences, but I argue that the Portuguese experience overseas was more important than the medieval experience in Iberia and that local conditions played a major role in shaping colonial realities. The Portuguese experience in Asia, for instance, was built on the tiny elite of mixed race luso-descents, while in Africa the Portuguese did not replicate the Brazilian experience of a large mixed race population.¹²

Freyre's monumental work nonetheless is rich of extraordinary insights.¹³ He touched crucial issues, such as the contrast between the Portuguese and the British

¹¹ For the notion of hybridism see Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

¹² Francisco Bethencourt, 'Race Relations in the Portuguese Empire', in Jay A. Levenson (ed.), *Encompassing the Globe. Portugal and the World in the 16th and 17th Centuries. Essays* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 2007), pp. 45-53 and 263-5, *idem*, 'A memória da expansão', in Francisco Bethencourt and Kirti Chaudhuri (eds.), *História da Expansão Portuguesa*, vol. 5 (Lisbon: Círculo de Leitores, 1999), pp. 442-480.

¹³ For a more positive assessment see Peter Burke and Maria Lúcia G. Pallares-Burke, *Gilberto Freyre. Social Theory in the Tropics* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008).

colonial experiences, the importance of religion in the Portuguese model and the cultural impact of African people, not only on agriculture and mining, bringing with them technical skills, but also on other daily spheres of life, such as gastronomy and language. He pioneered important approaches based on the analysis of the different social types of rural and urban houses (*casa grande* and *senzala*, *sobrado* and *mucambo*), studied as complex micro-cosmos, in which the slave enjoyed significant scope to negotiate his/her daily life; under this perspective, slaves could not be considered non persons. Freyre also launched the study of the multiple social relations structured by the habitat upon which colonial society was fabricated, addressing the social meaning of architecture, the hierarchy of houses, and the urban relation between house and street along the way. He placed sexual relations at the centre of his analysis, a taboo in his time, reflecting extensively on the permissiveness that shaped Brazilian colonial society. Freyre developed a different conceptual analysis of the extended family, open to multiple relations that permeated it in the context of rural and urban patriarchal society. This analysis allowed him to better understand the relations between men and women or between father and son. But perhaps the most interesting legacy of Gilberto Freyre, very much influenced by anthropology, was the refusal in his main books to consider the framework imposed by institutions (or the state) on society. Even if I do not share his perspective, I must express my admiration for this tour de force, which significantly challenged dominant ways of thinking.

The issue is how best to use Freyre's innovative thought concerning the evaluation of mixed race people and the identification of hybrid cultural forms resulting from inter-civilization contacts. Hybridism was a word scarcely used by Freyre: he preferred *mestiçagem*, which conveyed the same semantic content. It denoted the offspring of individuals of different kinds, the mixed character from

crossbreeding or cross-fertilization, the emergence of something different out of combination. The difficulty here is to identify the production of something different, what we could call 'innovation', since the phenomena of transfer, contamination and refusal have been identified quite well in cultural exchange. The word creolization has been used more successfully to study cultural hybridism in the context of early modern Atlantic, building on linguistic cross-fertilization and innovation. The term is useful, because it draws attention to relatively spontaneous phenomena, which do not depend on institutionally controlled cultural action. The production of ivory spoons, saltcellars, pixes and oliphants for the European market by local artisans in Sierra Leone, Benin and Kongo, from the late fifteenth to the late sixteenth century, is an interesting example of creolization. Biblical scenes, images of Portuguese gunmen and sailors, Portuguese emblems and coats of arms were carved with a profusion of African forms and decorative elements. The representation of crucifixes and crosses in the sixteenth and seventeenth century Kongo was also influenced by African visual worlds through images of protruding navels, praying figures and cut heads.¹⁴ Explorations of this kind meet Gilberto Freyre's main contribution to the historical approach of cultural exchange. But more recent research has shifted attention from West and Central Africa to the wider context of Creole Atlantic. It focuses for the first time on connections between Central Africa, the Iberian Atlantic and the Anglo-Saxon Atlantic. This is what I shall turn to now.

¹⁴ Ezio Bassani and William Fagg (eds.), *Africa and the Renaissance: Art and Ivory* (New York: The Centre for African Art, 1988), pp. 13-20; Ezio Bassani, *African Art and Artefacts in European Collections, 1400-1800*, edited by Malcolm McLeod (London: British Museum, 2000), pp. 285-304; Luís de Moura Sobral, 'The Expansion and the Arts: Transfers, Contaminations, Innovations', in Francisco Bethencourt and Diogo Ramada Curto (eds.), *The Portuguese Oceanic Expansion, 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 390-459; see also the crucial articles by Jean Michel Massing, Peter Mark and Marina Mello e Souza in Jay A. Levenson (ed.), *Encompassing the Globe*.

II

Linda Heywood's and John Thornton's book *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660*¹⁵ suggests two important theses concerning the historical formation of the Atlantic world: first, the early connection between Central Africa and the British colonies in North America; second, the crucial role played by the Christianised Kingdom of Kongo in the creation of a Creole Atlantic. The first thesis highlights the diversion of part of the slave trade from Central West Africa to the new British and Dutch colonies of the Caribbean and North America in the first half of the seventeenth century. British and Dutch interlopers and privateers not only traded in West Africa defying Portuguese claims to monopoly, but they also seized a significant number of Portuguese slave ships, whose particular cargo ended up in North America or the Caribbean islands. The importance of this previously neglected trade changes the picture of the Atlantic world: the connection between the Iberian and the Anglo-Saxon areas of influence has to be moved back to an earlier stage. Moreover, Heywood and Thornton sustain that African slaves were extremely active agents (artisans, musicians, artists) who left an imprint on the cultures of both Northern and Southern European colonial societies. The second thesis is even more interesting: it promotes Christianised Kongo as the early centre of Creole Atlantic; in this perspective, the kingdom of Kongo is supposed to have created and diffused a capacity for interaction with the European Christian colonisers, both Catholics and Protestants. This would explain the high rates of manumission in the 1660s in Northampton County, Virginia, never to be seen again there or in any

¹⁵ Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

other British colony up to the end of the eighteenth century. This issue, already raised by Edmund Morgan in 1972, has also been developed by Ira Berlin in 1996.¹⁶

The advantages of these new theses are obvious: they help to decentre the Atlantic world from the European colonisers, highlighting the presence across colonial borders of active African slaves with Christian references; they underline the particular Kongolese version of Christianity, which integrated elements of their previous religion and was diffused in Central Africa throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; they raise the issue of the similar behaviour of European colonists (Anglo-Saxon and Iberian) confronted with Christianised slaves at the beginning of the different processes of colonisation. In this interpretation the Portuguese are placed at the background of the picture: they just triggered a process that was convenient for the Kongolese royal family and social elites. In Heywood and Thornton's vision, the creation of a local Kongolese African secular clergy was a strong reality that influenced the diffusion of Christianity in the area more than the European missionaries. Although they are aware of the regular conflicts between local clergymen and European missionaries, fuelled by the permanent presence of the Portuguese in the region, they centre their analysis on the Christian African dynamic.

I am sympathetic to this approach, since the focus shifts from the Europeans to the Africans. In the past thirty years Heywood and Thornton have accumulated a unique amount of archival data that allows them to establish new connections and break traditional academic divisions between the Anglo-Saxon and the Iberian worlds. However, I would like to raise three problems concerning this stimulating book: first,

¹⁶ Edmund Morgan, 'Slavery and Freedom: the American Paradox', *Journal of American History*, 59 (1972-73); Ira Berlin, 'From Creoles to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African American Society in Mainland America' *William and Mary Quarterly*, 53 (1996), pp. 251-88, *idem*, *Many Thousands Gone: the First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1998); *idem*, *Generations of Captivity: a History of African-American Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

it supposes a wide spread Christianisation in Central Africa; second, it does not take into consideration the successive clashes with the Portuguese in this region and the eventual transformation of the Christian framework; third, it does not provide a clear definition of Atlantic creoles and Creolisation. I will leave aside this third issue, since it requires a specific and long enquiry. I will tackle instead the two first issues, which means that I have to reintroduce the Europeans into the picture. My critical approach has been inspired by two anthropologists: Georges Balandier, who asked how deep Christianisation had been in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, given that it was virtually extinct at the beginning of the nineteenth century;¹⁷ and Luc de Heusch, who tried to understand the local mythological elements that stimulated the Kongoleses to accept the Christian message, even in a limited and temporary way.¹⁸ The historical work by Anne Hilton and Wyatt MacGaffey is also important to tackle these issues.¹⁹ What I will try to do here is to use two case studies to reflect on the Portuguese colonial project in Africa, its local impact and its limits, but also on the Kongoleses political project, which adopted Christianity so quickly.

In 1488, the Wolof prince Bemoim was deposed. He ruled a territory near the mouth of the Senegal River, where the Portuguese were used to trade slaves and gold. He had previously sent gifts and an ambassador to the Portuguese king John II. He took refuge in a Portuguese caravel with a certain number of partisans and decided to sail to Lisbon to ask the Portuguese king for military assistance. John II welcomed him in a stately manner: he offered Bemoim the finest fabrics, ordered to have him served in silver and received him standing up three steps from the throne with the hat half taken, as he would have done with an European prince. Bemoim and his

¹⁷ Georges Balandier, *La vie quotidienne au royaume du Kongo du XVI^e au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1965).

¹⁸ Luc de Heusch, *Le roi de Kongo et les monstres sacrés* (Paris : Gallimard, 2000).

¹⁹ Anne Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985); Wyatt MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa: the Bakongo of Lower Zaire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

followers threw themselves to the ground to kiss the king's feet, took earth and put it over their heads in sign of submission. The king asked them to stand up and listened to the prince, translated on the spot by the royal African interpreters. Rui de Pina, the chronicler who recorded these events, praised the words and sentences of the Wolof ruler, "which did not seem [pronounced] by a black barbarian, but by a Greek prince educated in Athens". John II talked to the prince several times, promised the required military assistance and offered in his honour feasts of bulls and canes, as well as evening masks, theatre and dances. Bemoim was Muslim and it was decided to convert him into Christianity (in the words of the chronicler "tratou-se de o converter"). He was made Christian with six of his followers at the Queen's chamber, with the king and queen, the prince, the duke of Bragança, the papal nuncio and the bishop of Tangier as godfathers. Bemoim received the name of Dom João (dom as an Iberian form of address underlining noble origin), was knighted by the king and received a coat of arms (golden cross on red field with the arms of Portugal). Bemoim declared his obedience and vassalage; an account of his conversion was sent to Rome. Another twenty four followers converted the following days. He was finally dispatched to recover his dominion with twenty caravels commanded by Pero Vaz da Cunha. Besides the troops, the Portuguese took with them carved stone and wood to build a fort and a church. When they arrived at the place, suspicion was raised against Bemoim. The Portuguese captain ended up killing him and returned to Lisbon. John II was extremely disgusted, because the prince should have been brought back to be interrogated. But he did not dare to punish the captain.²⁰

²⁰ Rui de Pina, *Chronica d'el rei D. João II*, chapter XXXVII, in *Crónicas*, edited by M. Lopes de Almeida (Porto: Lello, 1977). The episode was also analysed by Avelino Teixeira da Mota, 'D. João Bemoim e a expedição portuguesa ao Senegal em 1489', *Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa*, 26 (1971), 63-111.

This story is extremely revealing: the deposed ruler was received stately as a European prince; he was recognised as noble with ruling status, but he was integrated as vassal of the Portuguese king and received a new identity as Christian knight; his conversion was transformed by the Portuguese king into an act of propaganda to impress Rome. The tension between the projection (and attribution) of the European status of knighthood and the ethnic prejudices against black Africans was visible in this early episode. Rui de Pina praised the “Greek” speech of Bemoin, but the captain of the expedition did not trust the Wolof ruler. Probably he feared a trap in unknown territory, or he heard natural dissent concerning the project of building a fort and a church. The strength of ethnic prejudices at the royal court in Portugal might explain the incapacity or impossibility for the king to persecute the captain. And we must underline that John II was the most feared king in Portuguese history, who did not hesitate to kill his most powerful noble rivals, including a brother in law. This case reveals another tension, between the royal projects of recognition and subsequent assimilation of the native princes, and the practices of the Portuguese merchant-knights ²¹ on the ground, much more aware of the fragility of the structures and the frequent change of the local relations of power, naturally inclined to pursue a mixed action of sack and trade. The recognition of European-like noble status to the black African rulers seems surprising in a context of already rooted maritime slave trade, since the 1440s, which highly contributed to diffuse a depreciative image of black Africans, namely as people who would sell their own children and relatives ²², one of

²¹ This ambiguous social-type that pervaded the Portuguese expansion was well defined by Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, *A expansão quatrocentista portuguesa*, 1st ed. 1962, revised and enlarged (Lisbon: Dom Quixote, 2008).

²² This image is inscribed in the first systematic description of the kingdom of Congo, translated in several languages, Latin, Dutch, English, German and French, written by Filippo Pigafetta under direct testimony of Duarte Lopes, who had lived there for a long time: *Relatione del reame di Congo et delle circonvicine contrade* (Rome: Bartolomeo Grassi, 1591), book II, chapter V. There is a facsimile of the Italian edition with a Portuguese translation by Rosa Capeans, *Relação do Reino do Congo e das Terras Circunvizinhas*, 2 vols. (Lisbon: Agência Geral do Ultramar, 1951).

the stereotyped *topos* used to justify the European pillage of the region. But this recognition of nobility was instrumental, as part of a political project that required alliances in Africa in order to establish a steady presence on the field and prepare future military operations. This is exactly what happened in Congo.

The first contacts of the Portuguese with the kingdom of Congo occurred in the same conjuncture of the 1480s and 1490s. There was an exchange of gifts and ambassadors that led to a stable Portuguese presence in the region, helped by the existence of a structured and important regional power. The conversion of the local rulers was an explicit goal since the beginning: the Congolese king was asked to reject his idols and sorceries, “all this said in a soft way [recommended the Portuguese king] to avoid scandal due to the rudeness and idolatry in which he lived”.²³ In 1491, the Portuguese expedition obtained authorization to build a church at the headquarters of the Kongolese power, the city of Mbanza-Kongo, later called São Salvador, and converted into Christianity the king Nzinga a Nkuwu (baptised D. João), most of the royal family and part of the nobility. This action was followed by a ritual destruction of the “house of idols” performed by the Franciscans, and consecrated by a victorious military expedition, assisted by the Portuguese, against rebellious vassals, the Bateke, near the Zaire River. The last years of Nzinga a Nkuwu’s reign were conflict-ridden: he reverted to his previous beliefs, probably because the imposition of monogamy raised enormous social and political problems with previous wives and relatives, problems replicated among the nobility; he had a clash with his elder son Mvemba a Nzinga, baptized Afonso, who became rooted in the Christian faith and was exiled to the province of Nsundi. When the king died, his son Mpanzu a Kitima, who was not a Christian, received the support of the vast majority of the population and was

²³ Rui de Pina, *Chronica d’el rei D. João II*, chapter LVII.

probably elected by the noblemen invested with that function. Afonso challenged this choice, entrenched himself in the capital São Salvador, mobilised the Christian nobility and engaged in a battle with the help of the Portuguese. Mpanzu a Kitima was killed and Afonso enthroned; he enjoyed a long reign (1509-40) that favoured the diffusion of the Christian faith in Congo.²⁴

The Portuguese kings targeted the kingdom of Congo with a sustained expedition of missionaries, soldiers, traders, school teachers, Christian books, liturgical vestments and hangings, European fabrics, arms, horses, agricultural tools and even artisans – stonemasons and carpenters were especially appreciated. The failure in the kingdom of Benin, to which a similar enterprise was launched in the same conjuncture of the 1480s and 1490s, increased the investment in Congo. Here the Portuguese guaranteed a constant flow of people and received in exchange, mainly under the special conditions of D. Afonso's reign, a significant number of Congolese noblemen, namely members of the royal family, to be taught in the Christian faith in Lisbon and learn the habits of the kingdom.²⁵ The Portuguese first mirrored their court in the description of the Congolese court, and then managed to reshape it according to their own administrative set of functions and jobs. The Congolese king received a coat of arms from Portugal and was allowed to give himself titles of nobility – duke,

²⁴ The significant extracts of the different chronicles are published in *Monumenta Missionaria Africana. África Ocidental*, edited by António Brásio, vol. I, (Lisbon: Agência Geral do Ultramar, 1952); there are also important documents published by Visconde de Paiva Manso, *História do Congo: documentos* (Lisbon: Academia Real das Sciencias, 1877); finally, see W. G. L. Randles, *L'ancien royaume du Congo des origines à la fin du XIX^e siècle* (Paris : Mouton, 1968), chapters VII and VIII, Jan Vansina, *Kingdoms of the Savana* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), chapters 2 and 4; Luc de Heusch, *Le roi de Kongo et les monstres sacrés* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), and Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), chapter 2. For the chronology I used Ilídio do Amaral, *O reino do Congo. Os Mbundu (ou Ambundos), o reino dos "Ngola" (ou de Angola e a presença portuguesa de finais do século XV a meados do século XVI* (Lisbon: IICT, 1996).

²⁵ This sustained process of indoctrination concerned people from different areas: there is a receipt of expenses, from 1538 to 1543, with black and Indian students placed in Lisbon, in two convents of the Secular Canons of St. John Evangelist: See *Monumenta Missionaria Africana*, vol. II, pp. 66-69. The most significant documents by the Portuguese king Manuel on this issue are from 1512, concerning the embassy of Simão da Silva to Congo: see *Monumenta Missionaria Africana*, vol. I, pp. 222-53.

marquis and count – in the European fashion. The Portuguese were given the second best site of the capital São Salvador to build their walled neighbourhood, next to the main church and the also walled royal palace, surrounded by the houses of Congolese noblemen. This privileged African and Portuguese elite had access to the main water sources.²⁶ Although the Portuguese king established the tradition of calling the Congolese associate “his brother”, the latter was placed under a kind of protectorate, an unusual situation in Africa, as the Europeans, in general, had to pay regular tributes for their presence in different regions until the nineteenth century. The Portuguese king advised the Congolese ruler to declare obedience to the Pope and send an embassy to Rome, which occurred with Portuguese assistance. In an extraordinary conclusion to all this process, in 1518 the Portuguese king managed to convince the Pope to nominate Bishop Henrique, son of the Congolese king D. Afonso, who had been sent to Portugal six years earlier.²⁷ He became bishop of Utica and was reassigned to Kongo in 1521; he would be the first and only black African bishop until the twentieth century. There was a Catholic school for the Kongoles nobility, which provided the secular priests. In the middle of the sixteenth century the king of Kongo could intervene in religious disputes in neighbouring kingdoms, namely in Ndongo and Ngola, sending his own native priests when the Portuguese missionaries were in trouble. The bishopric of São Salvador, former Mbanza Kongo, capital of the kingdom of Kongo, was created by the pope in 1595. By the end of the sixteenth century thirteen parishes existed in the provincial capitals, maintained by native clergymen, with the financial assistance of the king of Kongo, who collected the tithe, and the king of Portugal, who guaranteed regular subventions.

²⁶ Filippo Pigafetta, *Relatione del reame di Congo et delle circonvicine contrade*, book II, chapter I.

²⁷ *Monumenta Missionaria Africana*, vol. I, pp. 414-7. Henrique was elected Bishop of Utica.

The Portuguese missionaries always looked down on native clergymen and repeatedly pointed out their supposedly insufficiency. But they did not contest conversion and considered, until the end of the seventeenth century, along with the Italian capuchins, who were much more efficient and better accepted, that Christianity would improve. It is obvious that the conversion of Kongolese elites to Christianity included a large integration of former religious practices and believes, immediately expressed in the KiKongo vocabulary used by the missionaries for the translation of the main religious notions: God was named *nzambi*, which means Supreme Being; saints were identified as ancestor's souls (*moyo*); the Holy Spirit was designated as *moyo ukisi*; the Holy Trinity was called *antu a tatu*, which means three people, again based on ancestors' souls; the main church in Mbanza Kongo was called *nzo a ukisi*, which means holy house, resulting from the transformation of *nkisi* (sacred object or idol) into *ukisi* (holy); the church with the function of cemetery for the royal family and related lineages was named *mbila*, which means grave or place for worship of the ancestors; the Catholic priest was called *nganga*, as the traditional religious practitioners; the cross, the medals, the images of saints and the host were designated as *minkisi* (plural of *nkisi*), which means magic objects or fetishes.²⁸

It is also obvious that the worship of former territorial gods or ancestors' souls was integrated in the worship of saints, as it happened on the other side of the Atlantic in the Maya, Inca and Nahua cultures, whose process of religious adaptation has been studied by Nancy Farriss, Sabine MacCormack and James Lockhart.²⁹ The main liturgical ritual accepted in Kongo, the baptism, was performed with salt, which

²⁸ These references were taken from Luc de Heusch and Heywood/Thornton.

²⁹ Nancy M. Farriss *Maya Society under Colonial Rule. The Collective Enterprise of Survival* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), chs. 10 and 11; Sabine MacCormack, *Religion in the Andes. Vision and Imagination in Early Colonial Peru* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); pp. 383-433; James Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the Conquest. A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), ch. 6.

reveals the religious syncretism. But what is striking here is the apparent free will of the Kongolese kings to adopt a foreign religion without a process of conquest or a major military process of intimidation. It is true that the Portuguese offered frequent military assistance to the Kongolese kings in their wars against regional enemies, namely the Imbangala, but this strategy had been implemented in other places, namely in Benin, without the same results. The fact is that the Portuguese here showed a remarkable diplomacy: the Portuguese king always treated the Kongolese king as his brother and equal. When the Kongolese king D. Alvaro I was expelled from the capital São Salvador in 1568 by an invasion of the Jagas (probably Imbangalas), he took refuge in an island of the Zaire River. He recovered his kingdom due to Portuguese military assistance and apparently he offered his vassalage to the Portuguese king. The Portuguese took advantage of the shift of power to launch, immediately in the 1570s, an operation of conquest in the southwest fringes of the Kongolese kingdom, which led to the creation of the city of Luanda and the establishment of several forts along the Kwanza River, facing the kingdom of Ngola. But we need to further consider the motives and reciprocal advantages of this double process of religious assimilation and military assistance with supposed political equality throughout most of the sixteenth century.

First, we have to understand the importance of the sea in Kongolese mythology. In this mythology, the aquatic underworld played a major role, placed over *Mpemba*, the realm of the dead, represented as white. The Kongolese elite might have seen the Portuguese according to the local notion of albinos (*ndundu*), considered in the northern region as the reincarnation of the ancestors but in the southern region as spirits of the water, genii of the nature (*nkita u simbi*). The Portuguese fitted this latter notion, which enhanced their prestige and the immediate

interest from the local governor of Soyo and then the king in Mbanza Kongo, who decided to convert. Probably they saw in the foreign religion a new source of magical and political power. Second, we have to highlight the fact that the Kongolese kings, contrary to the kings of Loango, for example, did not have magic powers, did not enjoy moral authority and were entirely dependent on the ritual action of the major religious authority, *kitomi* Mani Vunda.³⁰ The extraordinary appearance of the Portuguese, represented by the Kongolese with the above mentioned attributes, gave the Kongolese kings the opportunity to obtain an element of sacredness, reinforcing their power and liberating themselves from local political and religious constraints. It is true that the Kongolese kings never managed to get rid of the presence of Mani Vunda, who was curiously sent to Portugal as ambassador and remained a major king maker;³¹ but his magical power was curbed due to the presence of the Catholic priests. Moreover, the conversion of the Kongolese kings liberated them from normal regional rituals established to guarantee the perfection of the royal body, always seen as an escape goat from natural calamities. As a matter of fact, the Kongolese king was the only one who escaped certain death in case of disease or deformation of the body – death generally perpetrated by one of the wives or concubines of the other kings in Central Africa. But there is another element that can not be disregarded: the role of Christianity in the extraordinary reinforcement of central power. We have to keep in mind that the kingdom of Kongo was not an old and steady polity: according to Jan Vansina it had been established one, at the most two centuries before the arrival of the Portuguese; it was vulnerable to local revolts and successive invasions from other peoples.³² Therefore, local conditions explain conversion, the creative syncretism involved in the reception of Christianity and the political impact of the new religion.

³⁰ We follow here Luc de Heusch's interpretation.

³¹ Anne Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo*.

³² Jan Vansina, *Kingdoms of the Savanna* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), ch. 2.

In any case, the Christian framework would always remain fragile and limited to the royal family, the main related lineages and part of the urban population, with less impact on the rural areas. I agree with Balandier that Christianity was insufficiently rooted, discontinuous and precarious, engaged in constant conflict with traditional religious agents. But we have to nuance this vision in time and space: the extraordinary case of Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita, who claimed to be the incarnation of Saint Anthony and led a powerful religious and political movement at the beginning of the eighteenth century in Kongo, reflected the state of decline of the kingdom but also the persistent framework of Christianity that would only disappear throughout that century.³³

The Portuguese diplomacy of equal status attributed to the Kongolese king was rewarded in the long run: the Portuguese did not have the possibility of establishing their own power and needed the support of a strong regional power. The issue of vassalage is confusing, since it was claimed by several Portuguese reports and by the Portuguese king after the events of 1568, but no original document was found. The ambiguity can be attributed to African volatile political situation, but also to Portuguese forgery. In the same conjuncture, the king of Kotte in Sri Lanka and the king of Ternate in the Moluccas had accepted different forms of vassalage, which means that there was a new royal policy launched by the Portuguese king Sebastian to reinforce hierarchical feudal ties overseas. The establishment of the Portuguese on the fringes of the main powers in the region, with the foundation of Luanda, in front of the island where extremely valuable cowry was collected, indicates the choice of the best time and place. The erosion of the relations with the Kongolese kings became

³³ John K. Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony. Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Anthonian Movement, 1684-1706* (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 1998).

constant throughout the seventeenth century, due to the needs of slave trade.³⁴ The permanent state of war was beneficial for the Portuguese enormous and only business in the region, the traffic of human beings to America. The heavy Portuguese defeats at the hands of the Ngola in the last decades of the sixteenth century were slightly compensated by limited entrenchment in the following decades, but the Dutch presence in the area, culminated with their occupation of Luanda between 1641 and 1648, represented a major disruption of the traditional alliances. The kingdom of Kongo established diplomatic relations with the Dutch and sent ambassadors to Recife and Amsterdam. They obviously tried to find alternative alliances to curb Portuguese growing political ambitions in the region. The trust between Portuguese and Kongolese never recovered and the Portuguese developed a much bolder military strategy after the wars against the Dutch in Brazil. The re-conquest of Luanda was the initiative of the governor of Rio, Salvador Correia de Sá, who mobilised Brazilian troops. This set the example for the years to come: the following governors of Angola, João Fernandes Vieira and André Vidal de Negreiros had been commanders of war in Brazil and they also brought with them mixed race troops immune to African diseases. This situation created a new military advantage that led in 1665 to the battle of Ambuíla between the Portuguese and the Kongolese, won by the former. There is an important debate about the real consequences of this battle for the decline of the Kongolese kingdom,³⁵ but there is no doubt that it represented a turning point. By that time the kingdom of Kongo had ceased to be useful for the Portuguese colonial

³⁴ David Birmingham, *Trade and Conflict in Angola: the Mbundu and their Neighbours under the Influence of the Portuguese, 1483-1790* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966); for a later period Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death. Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730-1830* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Luiz Felipe de Alencastro, *O trato dos viventes. Formação do Brasil no Atlântico Sul, séculos XVI e XVII* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2000).

³⁵ John K. Thornton, *The Kingdom of Kongo. Civil War and Transition, 1641-1718* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1983) undermines its importance.

project, but it would take another two centuries and a half for the Portuguese to establish an efficient political control of the hinterland.

The crucial role of the Kongolese in accepting Christianity and making it their own variety results clear from Heywood's and Thornton's book. The vicissitudes of this version of Christianity needs to be further analysed, but we now have a good research basis. In the long term, the contradictory impact of the Portuguese should be reassessed: I have stressed the erosion of native Christianity due to different political projects in time and space. Enslavement and slave trade might have empowered Kongolese kings for a period of time, but they soon understood the difficulty of maintaining a political system based on large regional warfare. Heywood and Thornton might have overestimated the importance of Christianity among Kongolese, Imbangala, Ngola and other enslaved Bantu peoples from Central Africa, but they rightly draw attention to the status of African slaves as brokers in the Creole Atlantic, in which superficial conversion played an undeniable role both in Protestant and Catholic areas. The issue here is to overcome deductive reasoning and enlarge the analysis of specific cases, which can show the limits and the possibilities opened by this approach. Even in the Spanish and Portuguese empires it was the colonial framework, shaped by confraternities, which created a dynamic of rooted Christianity among slaves and freedmen, attracted by concrete actions in favour of marginal improvement of their condition. The Kongolese appropriation of Christianity for the reinforcement of their kingdom and the internal position of their kings was very much a project of the elite (meaning royal family and main noble lineages). It is true that this elitist model was transmitted to the Imbangalas and the Ngola kingdom, but with discontinuities, permanent disaffection and set-backs. It is very difficult to attest a steady, rooted Christianity at the level of the population in the sixteenth and

seventeenth centuries. A permanent state of war benefited slave trade but certainly not a top down effective Christianization of the population.

The Creolization of the Atlantic world as a consequence of this extraordinary case of religious hybridism is a fascinating hypothesis, which needs further research not only in America but also in Africa, to understand the slaves' beliefs before they embarked and after the middle passage. It interlinks with Gilberto Freyre's re-evaluation of hybridism in Brazil, but pushes the issue to a complex religious and cultural sphere and places it in a much wider context. In the late 1940s Freyre was confronted with the international interest on possible applications of his method to other cultural areas, but he never abandoned the comfort of Brazil and the 'Portuguese world'. What is at stake now is no longer colonial people's ability of miscegenation, but native people's capacity to negotiate, absorb, reject or transform external cultural forms and their use of them to assert their position and shape new societies.